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Japan

Market Development Reports

Technology Enables Consumers to Get Product Information Using their Cell Phones

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Report Highlights:

Retailers are employing new technology to make more information available to their customers. By combining 2-dimensional bar codes with recent advances in cell phone technology, customers are now able to look up information such as pesticides usage and soil components while still in the store.

Includes PSD Changes: No
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[JA]

According to an article in the November 21 edition of Nihon Nogyo Shinbun (Japan Agricultural Newspaper), starting in March 2005, Uny affiliated supermarkets will begin selling cherry tomatoes produced in Toyohashi with a new technology that will allow consumers to use their cell phones to look up product information while they are still in the store. Consumers will be able to look up the name of the producer; records of agricultural chemicals used; the approximate residues of these chemicals on the product; the amount of nitrogen, phosphoric acid, and potassium in the soil; and other types of production information.

This program is being partly run by a company called Science Create. Science Create is a quasi-public corporation established jointly by Toyashi City, the Development Bank of Japan, the Toyashi Chamber of Commerce, and 113 other private companies. One of the stated goals of Science Create is to promote agriculture using information technologies. Participating companies include Japan Agriculture (JA) Toyohashi, JA Aichi Minami, Toyohashi University of Technology and Science, and Uny, a Nagoya-based supermarket chain. The reported initial investment cost for this project is 100 million yen, while the estimated annual operating is 20 million yen.

The bar code technology is about 20 years old but it is the advance is cell phone capabilities combined with the growing trend of providing consumers with production information that has enabled this type of project to emerge. The plan is for a 2-dimensional code to be attached to the product or printed on the bag, and this code will be linked to a database with information on the product. The consumer will be able to take a digital picture of the bar code with their cell phone, and the cell phone will be able to translate that picture into a code that will be linked to information on the internet.

If the spring 2005 trial with cherry tomatoes is successful, the company plans to expand to other commodities in the summer of 2005 such as persimmon, broccoli, and watermelon.

This type of technology is being used elsewhere in the supermarket. A recent full-page advertisement for Ito Ham explains how you can look up recipes while in the store using the same type of bar code and a DoCoMo cell phone. Any customers with the required type of cell phone will be sent to an internet site but they can only acquire information if they are registered.